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STANDARD MEDICINES,

OR

REVISION OF REMEDIAL AGENTS.

A Paper read at the Social Science Association, June 13, 1862.

BY

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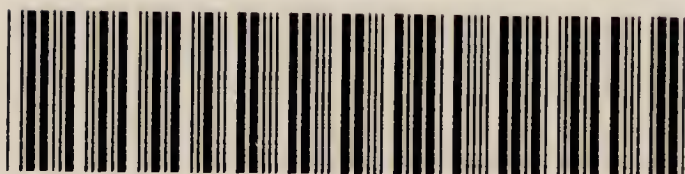
PRINTED BY EMILY FAITHFULL,

PRINTER AND PUBLISHER IN ORDINARY TO HER MAJESTY,

VICTORIA PRESS, GREAT CORAM STREET, W.C.

1862.

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STANDARD MEDICINES,

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THE Social Science Association, the International "Congrès de Bienfaisance," and the International Exhibition, all take cognizance of certain objects which relate more or less directly to questions affecting health.

There seems, therefore, to be now a most favourable opportunity for calling the attention of scientific persons to any question of a comprehensive character affecting health, which can only be settled by general combination.

I desire to suggest such a subject in the department of practical medicine; viz., "the advantage which would accrue to medical science, and to humanity, if a committee of medical and scientific men from the principal nations could agree on some uniform rules for testing, once for all, the therapeutical properties of all such drugs and other remedial agents as have acquired, or may acquire, a reputed but indefinite value."

It is no matter of blame, either to past ages, or to our own, that there are still many doubtful facts recorded in some medical books and current in medical traditions. This is one of the conditions naturally attaching to an ancient Art, which grew up at different periods, among various nations. It is an evil which has been greatly diminished in our own and other countries, but which combined action would still further remedy. There are many living skilled and willing labourers in this field of knowledge. The numbers yearly increase of those who would probably be only too glad of any plan which would really make their disunited and individual researches part of a systematic and, therefore, more convenient and more complete inquiry.

There seem to be three objects theoretically desirable in this matter.

1st. That civilized nations should all possess the most complete possible list of remedies for disease.

2nd. That from the existing lists of reputed remedies there should be eliminated those which are inferior to others of similar tendency, and those which certainly are of no value at all.

3rd. That there should be some permanent recognised means for reporting on and examining new substances that are supposed to have remedial properties.

It may not yet be possible to effect either of these purposes; but it can do no harm to have so evidently useful an object in view, though its attainment may in truth be remote.

It would be trifling with the time of the Association to offer now many illustrations of this subject. It may be sufficient, First, to advert to the great difference of opinion which always has existed and still does exist, even within the medical profession, both as to the effects of many remedies, and as to what are the best means to produce a given result. These differences must arise either from partial or from erroneous information, because they cannot be explained wholly by variations in country, climate, race, and constitution. Secondly, to remark on the fact, which is becoming more and more accepted among fair and competent reasoners, that many diseases pass off at least as quickly when left to their spontaneous action as when interfered with; supposing always that the sufferers are placed in conditions the most favourable to health, and that the ordinary functions of the body are attended to. This shows, what is now well known, that drugs which were once supposed to cure, in many cases had little or no effect, and in some retarded the natural progress towards recovery.

The proposition which I should wish, under these circumstances, to submit to the consideration of this Association, may be most clearly stated in the form of a resolution, which, at the conclusion of this paper, I propose to move; viz.:—

“That, in the opinion of this meeting of the Social Science Association, the time is arrived when a committee of Physicians, Physiologists, Scientific Chemists, and Pharmaceutists, composed of representatives of the principal European nations and of the United States, may advantageously be formed, having for its objects to collect opinions from the most competent persons, as to what remedial agents are of substantial therapeutic efficacy, as to how they may be best prepared, and which in any given pathological state are the most useful.”

To this proposal there are two or three obvious objections.

In the first place, any one, unacquainted with the condition of pharmacy and therapeutics, might suppose the subject to be so well understood and so simple that the consideration of it must be unnecessary. A glance at the “*Pharmacopée Universelle*” would undeceive him, and he would be astounded by the variety of preparations there collected; and he might correctly enough suggest, that in so

great a number some must be identical with others, and some again inferior to others ; therefore, that some were useless, and others negatively harmful.

But secondly, an accomplished pharmacist would very likely say, that however desirable the undertaking, it was, from its magnitude, hopeless. To this it may be answered, that the more difficult, of the more consequence that it should not be delayed. For we have only to reflect that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of medicinal preparations in use in the world which are at best deceptive, in consequence of uncertainty as to their real effects on the human organism in disease, or of want of uniformity in the mode of preparing them ; besides, new substances are being every year added to the list of chemical bodies, some of which are probably more readily prepared, and more certain in their effect, than existing compounds now in vogue, while old ones may drop into disuse which are really better than the new. Some persons have a weak leaning towards drugs or treatment of which they have never heard before, and relinquish, therefore, old and good medicines from this passion for change and novelty. Every year, therefore, these supposed important additions increase the bulk and the uncertainty of the *Materia Medica*.

The good sense of sound practitioners of every country and every age has led them, as they advance in life and gain wider experience, to rely on fewer weapons, and to employ those only of which they thoroughly understand the use. Yet, as every decennial period makes our *Pharmacopœias*, or the supplements to them, as I have said, more voluminous, so the younger practitioners and students of medicine are destined to become more and more oppressed by the variety of doubtful remedies of which they are expected to know the precise value.

One consequence of the uncertainty which springs from the recommendation and adoption of remedies that have not been sufficiently tested by large experience and careful observation, has been a tendency to scepticism as to remedies in general, and there has consequently been great danger of an exaggerated and overstrained “*medecine expectante*,” among even honest inquirers.

But the attitude of the medical mind of Europe is now for the most part simply to seek to know what is true. On the whole, the tendency of public opinion, even in medical matters, is happily in the same direction. There is, therefore, every ground for aiding the endeavours of those who are importing additional accuracy into their department of knowledge.

Should evidence of these opinions be required, it would not be difficult to furnish it. But I trust enough has been said to show the *DESIRABLENESS* of such international action as, sooner or later, might result in a uniform *pharmacopœia*, containing at least what might be called the “*standard medicines*,” with condensed commentaries on their properties, and reference to the chief evidence on which those properties rested, as agreed upon by such united inquirers.

A further objection, admitting the *désirableness* of the inquiry, that is likely to arise, is, that this Association does not possess an organization suitable to the purpose, and that the inquiry is, besides, of too technical a nature.

I will not waste the time of the meeting by seeking to prove the abstract proposition, that it has a constitution fitted for this purpose ; but I will state what it seems to me we might do, if the object be considered worthy of attention.

The Public Health Section might recommend the appointment of a committee consisting of three or more members, with power to add to their number ; requesting them to report on the subject-matter at a future meeting. The committee would proceed to take the opinions, or obtain the co-operation, of such persons as they thought fit to consult. The persons so consulted, or the committee so enlarged, might prepare, provisionally, a list of such medicines as they themselves would accept as standard remedies of the first order, as mercury, opium, quinine, iron, arsenic, and others. They might state which forms of these they really require in practice, which they would willingly do without, and what essential articles they consider to be omitted from the catalogue. The committee might, if they preferred to avoid personal responsibility, adopt provisionally the *Materia Medica* of the New Pharmacopœia, prepared lately with extreme care by persons who have been engaged in that forthcoming work. It would be a clear gain, however, to have the mature united opinions of a few of the most eminent practitioners of different countries on any list whatever. It would form a starting point for future precise investigation. It would, besides, be a curious document. Articles would be found to be highly esteemed by some, which would be considered worthless by others ; and, on the other hand, a general consensus of evidence from some countries might lead to the re-investigation of substances too hastily discarded in other lands.

I cannot but think that it would be a clear gain to therapeutic science, if, in this way, the vast body of information which exists in various shapes on this matter could be sifted by general consent. Just as reports that have been furnished to the British Association for the Advancement of Science have constituted epochs or starting points for the subject to which they had reference, so would a carefully constructed list of this kind prove an epoch in the history of pharmacy, and give increased stability to the sure foundations of rational medicine.

How many substances there are whose efficacy is established beyond question I will not pretend to decide. Shall we say 100, 200, 50 ? Of course I do not include, in the category of the highest order of remedies, all those useful, but secondary substances, which are necessary for giving consistency, flavour, and colour. They would excite no questions, and give no trouble, and great latitude may be and is allowed in the choice of them in different regions and climates.

I think that it is easy to see of what service it would be if there were any body to whose verdict new substances said to have special medical virtues could be referred, and by whose judgment useless substances could be discarded. It may be supposed that in this country such a body exists in the College of Physicians, or in the Medical Council. If either the College of Physicians or the Medical Council are willing and able to undertake this permanent duty, and succeed in obtaining the co-operation of similar bodies in other countries, the Committee of this Association could do no better than report that the College or the Council had undertaken to do so. This indeed is certain, that the present eminent President of the College of Physicians of England would be sure to give any request from this Association the attention which it deserves, and it is equally certain, that his hands would be strengthened by the application from you.

There is one point which I am bound to state; that when it is borne in mind that this empire will very shortly possess, through the labours of Dr. CHRISTISON and his able coadjutors, for the first time a National Pharmacopœia, we may be sure that in the race of improvement our Materia Medica will not be the least perfect. It is, indeed, partly the expected appearance of this work in this very year that makes an international agreement on what are the *Standard Remedies* most opportune. An agreement between our three kingdoms may be a step towards a wider agreement still. Yet I shall be surprised if there are not remedies in common use which are not in that Pharmacopœia, and still more gratified if the Materia Medica has been relieved of all substances of doubtful efficacy. But this last is really at present impossible, and is not the business which would *first* come under the consideration of the Committee. That business would be : 1st. to produce, or get produced, and keep filled up, a *select Pharmacopœia of those substances, which, ON GROUNDS ADMITTED by physiologists, chemists, and hospital physicians of ALL countries, are true or standard remedies of the highest order*;—then, 2ndly. to place in a second list all uncertain or secondary substances, which are proved to be unworthy of a first place; and, 3rdly. to reject substances which, however popular, have been found on trial by approved rules to be wholly useless.

I have only to add the expression of my regret that this subject has not had a better exponent, or one who had paid, like Dr. Christison, Dr. Garrod, Dr. Parkes, or others, especial attention to the construction of Pharmacopœias and the evidence of the action of remedies. But I could not satisfy my sense of duty, or of expediency, if I did not seize the opportunity which the meeting of this Association affords on the present occasion, for drawing the attention of these and other eminent authorities, to the advantage of some international action in this matter. I therefore move,—

“That in the opinion of this meeting of the Social Science Association, the time is arrived when a committee of Physicians,

Physiologists, Scientific Chemists, and Pharmacutists, composed of representatives of the principal European nations, and of the United States, may advantageously be formed, having for its objects to collect opinions from the most competent persons as to what remedial agents are of substantial therapeutic efficacy, as to how they may be best prepared, and which in any given pathological state are the most useful.

“That Dr. Watson, F.R.S., President of the Royal College of Physicians of London, Dr. W. Farr, F.R.S., of Somerset House, Mr. Simon, F.R.S., of the Privy Council Office, be, with myself, requested to act on the committee, with power to add to their number.

“And that they take such steps in furtherance of the object as they see fit, and report thereon at a future meeting.”

The resolution was seconded by Dr. Gavin Milroy, and carried.

